



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

NEW BOOKS REVIEWED

THE POETIC MIND. By F. C. Prescott, Professor of English, Cornell University. New York: The MacMillan Company.

The work undertaken by Professor Prescott in his book, *The Poetic Mind*, is genuinely needed. Here is no mere classification of literary effects, or eloquent avowal of faiths and preferences, but an attempt at fundamental analysis. Emphatically, it is the poetic *mind*—not simply poetry or poetic people—that is Professor Prescott's theme, and he has undoubtedly chosen the right way to get at the root of the real question. Is poetry mere vagary or mere technique? Is it prophecy or embroidery? Has it a gospel, or does it merely afford an outlet for all manner of emotion? Most of all, is there any ground for the insistence of so many poets upon that tenuous entity called Beauty, and is one who devotes his life to the service of this ideal to be admired or to be scorned? These and a hundred other questions come crowding, the moment we drop the professionally literary manner and endeavor to be human in our consideration of poetry.

One cannot be permanently contented with a poetic criticism which, however inspired and poetic in itself, tends to be occult, vague and temperamental. Nor can we altogether rid ourselves of the difficulty by taking a mainly objective view of the poetic process, as Max Eastman does in his illuminating book upon the appreciation of poetry. It is not enough to know that poetic modes of expression are as common and as instinctive with all sorts of people as prosaic forms of speech; that there is poetry in slang, and that poetry is in the very fibre of our language. What Mr. Eastman has told us about imaginative realization as opposed to purposive thinking is especially helpful, but does not solve the whole problem. Back of all else, there is in the mind of the average person a more or less justifiable "all or nothing" attitude toward poetry. Either this art, with all its extravagances and its quasi-spiritual claims, is justified, or it isn't! And in the latter case it is only a polite amusement, involving in many cases what seems a quite disproportionate "expense of spirit."

There is really no escape from this dilemma. If the public is pleased with such poets as Longfellow and Tennyson, in whom ecstasy is considerably tempered with tact and common sense, along come the critics presently to say that these are, after all, hardly to be reckoned among the greatest poets. Poetry cannot deny its own sense of superiority; it cannot conceal its own claims to inspiration without ceasing to be poetry. Whether one applies the

romantic test—the test of “the light that never was, on sea or land”—or the classic test of universality, the criterion of “the grand style,” it is all the same: in each case there is reference to something lofty and not very intelligible. And if we cannot believe in “the consecration and the poet’s dream,” if we cannot maintain our faith in this despite the absurdities and the childishness with which poetry often seems to be allied, if we cannot, in short, take Shelley seriously, a considerable number of us will be unable to read poetry with any real contentment, though we may continue to be critics or professors of literature and to consider ourselves persons of acute literary discernment.

It is the signal merit of Professor Prescott’s book that it presents this question of *inspiration* as the central problem and attacks it boldly. The author propounds queries that would have seemed almost sacrilegious to the poetry-lovers of a century ago, and he has the courage to answer them in a way that risks the appearance of absurdity in the eyes of those who to-day would like to see poetry stripped of all mystery.

The simple truth, as Professor Prescott sees it, is that poetry is largely a result either of inspiration or of a more or less successful effort to imitate the ways of inspiration. But what is this inspiration, and whence does it come?

The author finds his answer in the unconscious. He does not seem quite certain, it is true, whether the unconscious is to be regarded as a sort of psychic ocean, or reservoir of cosmic intelligence, as F. W. H. Myers conceived it, or merely as a collection of “neurograms” (nerve traces), which is the view of Dr. Morton Prince. But, on the whole, he shows a decidedly open mind toward the former hypothesis, almost the only hypothesis, be it said, which seems capable of reconciling science with poetry. Through fascinating pages, he draws out the similarities between dream and poetry and the relation of poetic creativeness to such phenomena as those of multiple personality. By and large, the effect of all this is to impart great vitality to the subject under discussion. Poetry, at lowest, is part of our human heritage—like love and hate, religion and war, and many other things good and bad. It is bound up with our nerve cells, and with the organizations of our brains. It may be as haunting as a guilty conscience, or as inspiring as our unexplained good impulses. At all events, it originates not in the region of superficial fancy and speculation, but in the psychic depths. There, it *may* have access—who knows?—to deeper sources of wisdom than the conscious self is aware of. It behooves us, at any rate, to treat it with respect.

The final impression, however, that is left upon one by this excellent book is that we live in an age of twilight speculation and half-science, an age in which robust faith and serene delight are difficult to attain. Thus, poetry in seeking the support of the psychologists seems to compromise herself a little, as does religion when she seeks help in spiritualism. Our knowledge is incomplete. We know enough to be wise, but not enough to be confident in our joys.